

**SAMUEL TERSOO ORTESE  
BOOK REVIEW: *HOW  
EUROPE UNDERDEVELOPED  
AFRICA*  
BY: WALTER RODNEY,  
HOWARD UNIVERSITY PRESS,  
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## INTRODUCTION

*How Europe Underdeveloped Africa* is a book written by Walter Rodney, a Guyanese historian. The book presents a comparative historical analysis of related involuntary and unplanned development in Europe in relation to Asia and Latin America. Even in Africa, Tanzania has been shown to have broken away from the communal-feudal mode of production that was characteristic of African countries before imperialism. The book exposes the unfavourable and deliberate exploitation of Africa that predates colonialism, especially through trade that assumed an international dimension beginning from the 15th Century when Africa

was drawn for the first time into common but unequal trade relations with Europe and the Americas. However, the major thrust of Rodney in this book under review has been to examine the indices that triggered the underdevelopment of Africa. The book is structured in six chapters, a postscript and the biography of the author in the concluding pages. The book is a masterpiece and groundbreaking about the comparative economies of Africa, Asia and Latin America. The book is better appreciated since it is not met with heavy criticism. Justice however, will be done to the analyses of the chapters in order to remain faithful to the summary of the book.

The Chapter One on "Some Questions On Development", interrogates development and underdevelopment. It poses questions that examined the growth between

the socialist camps- Soviet Russia and the capitalist economies which the capitalist according to Rodney "meted a stagnated developmental basis on the newly independent countries especially, Africa". Rodney holds that the underdevelopment of Africa stems from the unfavourable relations within the social setting in historical process. Development according to Rodney "implies an increasing capacity to regulate both the internal and external relationships".

In fact, the logic behind the underdevelopment of Africa is in the distribution of power. Power in this sense is seen as the ultimate determinant in human society being basic to the relations within any group and between groups.

Apart from the major preoccupation of the book, which is a comparative study of development

between Africa and the developed European nations, the preceding chapters present a striking trajectory of events in this book.

The three chapters; "How Africa Developed Before the Coming of the Europeans Up to the 15th Century", "Africa's Contribution to the European Capitalist Development- the Pre-Colonial Period" and "Europe to the Roots of African Underdevelopment- 1885", have according to the writer, discussed exhaustively the beginning of trade contacts with Africa by the Europeans. Africa was inadvertently drawn into trade contacts at her expense. The writer was explicit when he stated that before the establishment of contacts by the Europeans with Africa, Europe had advanced beyond communal-feudal mode of production. Europe was at her zenith of a capitalist society while Africa was still within the communal

society or a "free society". To Rodney, this was the root of Africa's underdevelopment. Rodney pointed out that Africa was developed in all spheres of human endeavour-politically, economically, and socioculturally before the Europeans came. Walter Rodney argued that, it was the exploitation of Africa in the multifaceted ways on the basis of slavery and slave trade that rendered Africa underdeveloped.

Walter holds that the unequal trade lasted up to 440 years (1445-1885) and equally exploited the manpower of Africans and rendered her politically and economically naked. Scholars, usually term this period as the "Rape of Africa".

Chapters Five and Six; "Africa's Contribution to the Capitalist Development of Europe- the Colonial Period" and "Colonialism as a System

for Africa". The analyses on these chapters according to the writer, examined an expatriation of "the fruits of human (African) labour went to the minority class, which was the white race and resident in Europe and North America". This is the crux of the dialectical process of development and underdevelopment as it evolved right into the colonial period.

*How Europe Underdeveloped Africa* has shown that the period between 1884-1885 when Africa was presented at the dinner table to shared by the European powers like Britain, France, Germany, Portugal, Spain, Italy etc. rendered Africa a "hunting ground" by these colonial powers each fighting to secure a sphere of influence and the result was colonialism. Colonialism in its truest sense, meant "Great intensification of exploitation and the exports of surplus in massive proportion". It has been

identified by Rodney that capitalism brought about colonialism. And that imperialism is the highest point of capitalism.

## CRITIQUE OF THE REVIEW

Walter Rodney's *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa* is masterpiece of comparative economic growth and development. One appreciable feature is that, it is not met with heavy criticisms. The book has been revised severally to meet with the global historical and capitalist scholarship.

Rodney himself has appreciated his book by trying to draw a 'balance sheet' or the ripple effects of the deliberate exploitation of Africa by the capitalist bourgeoisie. Rodney was critical when he said that "Colonialism in Africa was a one-armed bandit since it has adverse negative effects on African politics and economic powers".

The relationship undermined Africa and destroyed its cultural artifacts and social setting. All these, were catered away and stacked in London, Berlin and New York.

Rodney argued in contrast to colonial apologists (bourgeois scholars) that Africa benefitted from the relations and if they did, "It was purely accidental since the developments that came about by forced labor(*corvée*) at construction sites, bridges, hospitals schools and whatever colonial structure that was put on ground was to serve the interest of the colonialists. He submitted that, whatever the benefit derived, "The bad outweighed the good".

## CONCLUSION

*How Europe Underdeveloped Africa* is a book written by a Guyanese historian which holds that Africa was

first, inadvertently drawn into unequal trade whose terms were dictated by Europe and was deliberately exploited. Rodney argued that European colonial powers took toll and stripped off Africa politically and economically. The book compares Africa, Latin America and Asian economies to the capitalist European economies and Soviet-Russia's socialist economy in order to examine the disparity in development and growth. Rodney had identified the Marxist historical materialism that had advanced Tanzanian economy, but it was criticized by bourgeois scholars. The book is an excellent work in the comparative historical analyses of economies of nations and has no heavy criticisms to its credit except for the 'balance sheet' drawn by Rodney to weigh credit and the debit of colonialism where Rodney argued that "the bad outweighed the good". The deliberate and planned exploitation of

Africa had hitherto according to Rodney, been instrumental to the development of European nations-London, Berlin and New York. And this trend of exploitation continued into the 20th Century when political independence was finally handed to indigenous African national.